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## Introduction: Sex, Sexuality, and Gender as Useful Categories in Environmental History

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## "A lack of cross-field knowledge"

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### Introduction

#### SEX, SEXUALITY, AND GENDER AS USEFUL CATEGORIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

### "Nothing in Sight but Nature"

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When John Jones became "carried away with the idea" of crossing the continent to live in California, his wife's first reaction was, "Oh, let us not go." But Mary A. Jones's objection "made no difference . . . & on the 4th day of May 1846 we joined the camp for California." Used to the privileges and relative ease of white middle-class life, Mary Jones was exhausted by the rigors of the overland journey. She was also pregnant. Upon their arrival she was occupied with the new baby and preferred not to travel any more than was necessary. She relented, however, when her husband, who had been scouting the countryside for a homesite, insisted that she make a preliminary trip to see his selection. "We camped that night," she recalled. "My husband stopped the team and said 'Mary, have you ever seen anything more beautiful?'" The young wife and mother was repulsed rather than impressed, noting with horror, "There was nothing in sight but nature. Nothing . . . except a little mud and stick hut." Mary Jones, notes historian Lillian Schlissel, "found nothing grand, nothing wonderful, nothing to suggest what her husband so clearly saw. She and other women did not find the new country a land of resplendent opportunities. They heard their children crying and longed for home."<sup>1</sup>

Why did so many men and women of the same race and class have such different and visceral reactions to the same landscape? Why did the majority of the white middle-class men on the overland trails in the mid-nineteenth century embark

eagerly on their journeys, and why did so many of their wives accompany them only reluctantly, apprehensively, writing home to loved ones of their fear and dread?<sup>2</sup> Once in the West, some women eagerly threw off the social constraints of the East to embrace new opportunities, yet the reactions of men and women to the environment frequently remained polarized. Some sixty years later, many women were focused on protecting the natural resources (including trees, soil, birds, and animals) that so many men of their same race and class were determined, in the name of "progress," to exploit for profit. Lydia Adams-Williams represented the views of many women when she proclaimed in 1908, "Man has been too busy building railroads, constructing ships, engineering great projects, and exploiting vast commercial enterprises to take the time necessary to consider the problems which concern the welfare of the home and the future."<sup>3</sup> But her contemporary, George L. Knapp, called views like Adams-Williams's "unadulterated humbug" and dismissed conservationists' dire prophecies as "baseless vaporings." According to Knapp, men should be praised, not chastened, for turning "forests into villages, mines into ships and skyscrapers, scenery into work."<sup>4</sup>

This book is an effort to explain these kinds of extreme gendered divisions and to offer an enriched understanding of the powerful interplay between environment and sex, sexuality, and gender. The synergy produced by that interplay has been significant throughout American history, but it cannot be adequately understood and appreciated as long as those fields are discussed as discrete entities. The fields of gender and environment are growing, but scholars have seldom joined them together in analysis or heeded historian Carolyn Merchant's call that a gendered perspective be added to conceptual frameworks in environmental history.<sup>5</sup> They have not offered a unified analysis of the intersections that shaped gendered environmental concerns and activism and that framed as well the way the larger culture responded. Of the growing number of American environmental histories that feature women or gender, many remain narrowly focused on the modern environmental movement (environmentalism) or take a regional or otherwise limited approach.<sup>6</sup> Others offer fascinating global, gendered perspectives and profound philosophical insight but are not sufficiently focused for the reader specifically interested in American history.<sup>7</sup> Some of the existing scholarship concerning the role of gender in environmental history is even potentially damaging, such as the tendency to anthropomorphize and feminize nature through terms like "Mother Nature" and "Mother Earth," and calling environmental exploitation the "rape" of "virgin" land. Such tendencies devalue women and work against respecting nature as an agent in its own right: a partner, equal to humans in value and dignity.<sup>8</sup> Considerable work has been done, however, that is constructive and valuable. Many studies, for example, have been made of women naturalists and nature writers and of women in early environmental protection movements.<sup>9</sup>



In American environmental history surveys, women are most likely to appear in coverage of the Progressive Era (circa 1880–1917) as middle-class women claimed that their domestic expertise gave them a unique perspective on living in the new urban, industrialized society.<sup>10</sup> As families' production of their own food decreased, women became involved in activities to ensure that the store-bought foods were wholesome, free from impurities and harmful additives. Their campaigns for pure milk and better sanitation highlighted their new role as "municipal housekeepers." Other female reformers of the period applied their prescribed maternal role as caretakers to nonhuman nature and became active in the movements to create natural parks and nature preserves and to save the many species of birds that were being hunted into near extinction for their feathers. Journalist Wendy Kaminer didn't coin the term "nature's housekeepers" until 1992, but the housekeeping role for women that extended far beyond the confines of the home and local municipalities has long been important to environmental history.<sup>11</sup> It has, however, also overshadowed women's other contributions to the environment, such as opposition to nuclear war and support of soil conservation, activities not directly related to "housekeeping."

This study incorporates the better-known contributions made by women to environmental history but also moves beyond "Nature's Housekeepers" to provide that much needed overview of the role that sex, sexuality, and gender has played in the spectrum of American environmental history, from the pre-Columbian period to the present. In this view, gender is especially emphasized, particularly in the ways it has affected, and has been affected by, women.

### What Is the Difference between Sex, Sexuality, and Gender?

Sex, sexuality, and gender are related terms, and sometimes it can be hard to know where one leaves off and another begins. Sex is determined by physiology, but it encompasses more than simply the differences between male and female genitalia. Sex-related functions (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding) affected the way North American women interacted with the environment, starting with the farming practices of pre-Columbian Native Americans and continuing through to the present, as when female farm workers suffer the impact of pesticides on fetal development.<sup>12</sup> When faced with the challenge of domesticating the wilderness, slave buyers preferred the usually larger, stronger African males over the usually smaller, weaker African women, thereby skewing the sex ratio among slaves for several generations. Factors determined by sex also undoubtedly contributed to many women's reluctance to take the journey west. Some, like Mary Jones, were pregnant

and worried by the prospect of the rigors of the journey and the knowledge that there could be no delays of more than a day or two while on the trail, and that there were no medical facilities along the way.<sup>13</sup> Women who were not pregnant faced another sex-based burden: enduring menstrual periods on the road in the pre-tampon, pre-disposable pad days of the nineteenth century. Sex-based bodily functions have played an important role in people's environmental attitudes and actions throughout American history.

Sexuality focuses on sexual practices and sexual identity. Both African and Native American women thwarted their own reproduction as a form of resistance to being used as forced laborers, retarding their masters' efforts to transform the land. Birth control played a role in Progressive-era efforts to improve conditions within urban environments, and lesbians used certain landscapes, both built and natural, to resist homophobia and to help foster within themselves a more positive identity.

Gender is perhaps the more complex of the three factors, encompassing the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex. The ability to give birth and to breastfeed is determined by sex, as is getting ovarian or prostate cancer. Lung cancer, however, used to be a primarily male disease. Its increasing prevalence among women began once female smoking was no longer socially taboo and tobacco companies' advertisements began targeting women. The rise in women's lung cancer rates is the result of gender, of behavior resulting from changing ideas about what is considered acceptable for women. Gender, then, refers to culturally defined and/or acquired characteristics. Notions of gender affected the way people thought about themselves and others, and influenced the way they learned, lived, and wielded power.

Attributing to sex and anatomy the qualities and perceptions that resulted from gender and culture has resulted in false and damaging stereotypes throughout human history, but untying what sociologist Allan G. Johnson calls the "gender knot" is a daunting task.<sup>14</sup> With the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s came an explosion in scholarship seeking to understand which qualities that have been described as "natural" to men and women were actually the result of the internalization of powerful gender prescriptions based in social, economic, and political factors. For example, the advent of the birth control pill and legalized abortion dramatically reduced fears of unplanned pregnancies, paving the way for the sexual revolution that belied the long-standing "truth" that women were "naturally" less sexual than men. "Certainties," such as one sex being inherently better at math or more emotional, also came under close scrutiny.

Gender scholars face a series of challenging and complicated questions: If differences previously chalked up to sex were actually prescribed and constructed as a result of gender, then how, when, and why were those differences constructed? Can



they be deconstructed? Where do people get their ideas about what it means to be a man, and what it means to be a woman, and how and why have those ideas changed over time? How were the men and women who internalized the roles, values, and attitudes affected by the norms prescribed to them? What happened when gender roles perceived to be natural, and therefore fixed, changed?

This book focuses on how internalization of prescribed gender traits colored people's reactions to the world around them. It also reveals how significant and far-reaching the impact of sex, sexuality, and especially gender has been in women's responses to the environment and environmental issues throughout American history. Gender, sex, and sexuality shaped the social relationships between men and women, but they also influenced the way nonhuman nature was viewed, used, abused, protected, or preserved. Men and women frequently understood and responded to their environment and to environmental issues in decidedly different ways. Even as women uniquely contributed to how a particular environment developed, environments shaped the way women perceived themselves—as disempowered, as in the case of Mary A. Jones and other frontier women, or as strong and independent, as in the case of the lesbians who created alternative environments.

Environmental history is a relatively new discipline. In long-standing subfields of American history, the focus has traditionally been on the thoughts and actions of people, with the nonhuman world usually serving as a not-terribly-important stage upon which human actors perform. Studies of the colonial period, for example, tend to concentrate on the thoughts and actions of early settlers as they wrested civilization out of wilderness and laid the foundations for the American Revolution. Usually scant attention is paid to the changes that their practices brought to soils, water, and local flora and fauna. However, in the classic environmental history *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, William Cronon emphasizes the degree to which the early colonists transformed New England physically. Cronon exposes changes so far-reaching as to even affect climate and reveals how crucial such nonhuman factors were to the colonists' ultimate economic and political successes. By clearing land, farming, building fences, and introducing European domesticated animals and plants, colonists carried out an ecological revolution that was just as profound and far-reaching as the political revolution to come.

Despite the growing consensus on the importance of nonhuman nature, competing definitions of environmental history abound. One scholar went so far as to title his effort "A Death-Defying Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History."<sup>15</sup> Leading scholar J. R. McNeill issued one of the more inclusive and compelling definitions, asserting that there are three main strands of environmental history: material environmental history, focusing on changes in the biological and physical environment; cultural/intellectual environmental history,

focusing on representations of the environment and what they reveal about society; and political environmental history, focused on government regulation, law, and official policy.<sup>16</sup> This book defines “environment” very broadly, incorporating all three of those strands. It includes, for example, ecology (the science focusing on the interrelationships of organisms) and ecosystems, as well as landscapes, both natural and constructed. It sees humans as rightful members of the natural world, not as inherently exploitative outsiders. It looks at the modern environmental movement dedicated to the conservation or preservation of wilderness and natural resources within the last century, but also examines how and why throughout American history landscapes and places have shaped people, their values and their cultural institutions—and how and why people shaped those landscapes and places in return.

Sex, sexuality, and gender are as much a part of men's lives as they are of women's. Throughout much of history, however, men have wielded disproportionate political and economic power and received the lion's share of the attention from historians. When the new women's history first emerged in the 1970s, many of the early studies emulated the male model of focusing on the “greats” of the past and provided accounts of female leadership in various traditionally male-dominated fields, such as politics, medicine, and literature. Environmental historians followed suit: Many of the environmental history studies of the 1970s and 1980s that focused on women examined the contributions of individual female scientists (Alice Hamilton, pioneer in occupational medicine and industrial toxicology), conservationists (naturalist Caroline Dormon), and nature writers (Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*), with Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, becoming by far the most frequently cited and celebrated female environmentalist.<sup>17</sup> Because men have traditionally received greater attention from environmental historians, this book focuses primarily on women, but the uniqueness and importance of women's roles cannot be fully appreciated unless placed in an appropriately gendered context.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to sex, other factors, including race, ethnicity, and class, help construct gender roles, and the culture that results can change dramatically over time. These complexities must also be incorporated to appreciate fully the differences that gender, sex, and sexual identity have made in shaping men's and women's attitudes toward, and relationships with, the environment and each other. Race and class, for example, are at the heart of the environmental justice movements emerging in the 1970s.

Just as women's history rapidly developed from a rather pale imitation of men's history into a vibrant, rich, and important field in its own right, environmental history is broadening its focus to become a vast multidisciplinary field encompassing the entire globe. Women, not just individual female “greats,” increasingly appear in its literature, and issues of masculinity as well as sexuality, including reproduction



and homosexuality, are also recognized.<sup>19</sup> Studies of women in environmental history have also broadened from an emphasis on women activists who consciously worked to protect the environment to myriad gender-based environmental relationships across time and space.<sup>20</sup>

*Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* surveys a wide range of issues over a broad sweep of time and place from wilderness to cities to suburbia. Because gender played a key role throughout American environmental history, it (as well as sex and sexuality) is examined within the context of a variety of other factors. That is, explaining why and how women were thinking about the environment and interacting with it in different ways than men involves looking at free white women, enslaved women, white pioneer women, black pioneer women, poor urban immigrants, women of color living in areas formerly used by industry and often contaminated, white middle-class suburban women, and so on.<sup>21</sup> There is no single "woman's environmental experience" in any place and time—and yet across historical periods, age, sexuality, marital and maternal status, race, ethnicity, economic class, and gender consistently played a role in women's interactions with the environment. The topics examined in this book are exceptionally vivid and representative examples of a particular way in which gender affected significant environmental attitudes or actions, but they are by no means comprehensive.

The book proceeds chronologically for the most part, organized around key periods in American history with a greater emphasis on the twentieth century, given the abundance of research material and general interest. Occasionally a particular theme is studied over several time periods within a single chapter. Chapter 7, for example, emphasizes the gendering of sexuality, in this case homosexuality, and reveals the role of place in the evolution of lesbian identity over more than a century. As what it meant to be a lesbian changed over time, so did the kinds of environments in which lesbians felt the most at home and empowered.

Some women's organizations appear in more than one chapter. The Cambridge Plant and Garden Club (CPGC), founded in 1889, is one of the oldest garden clubs in the country, and its history reveals how the environmental consciousness of socially active white middle-class women developed over several generations from the care of houseplants to involvement in the nuclear freeze movement. Certain individuals are also highlighted because their actions or philosophies are representative of a group or trend rather than unique. For example, Adda Howie, a society matron turned dairy farmer, was initially ridiculed in the 1890s for keeping her barn scrupulously clean and even providing her cows with such feminine amenities as curtains. However, when her cows' butter and milk production broke all records, she was publicly praised for her skill in bringing traditional female values into barns and pastures, transforming her into a national, and then international, expert on dairy



farming. Although Howie hailed from the rural Midwest, her kind of gendered thinking about the impact of the workplace environment on both quality of life and productivity formed the foundation for urban women's claim to authority as reform experts when they brought their "natural" expertise to the factories and other work environments of industrializing America.

No single book can reveal the totality of the intricate web of relationships between sex, sexuality, gender, and the environment throughout American history. This volume incorporates some of the leading scholarship documenting women's environmental contributions as nature writers (including poets and novelists, as well as authors of nonfiction) and scientists (such as biologists, botanists, and chemists). Its larger goal, however, is to show that people and movements that achieve the bulk of attention in more traditional environmental studies are not the sum total of the interplay between gender and environment and thus they may be relegated to the background here. For example, while the environmental movement that swept the nation in the 1970s merits significant notice, the largest share of attention is given to the aspects of that movement that feature distinct gender differences.

Like most surveys of American history, this one begins with Native Americans, but with a less conventional focus on prescribed gender roles within a variety of indigenous tribes, and more discussion of the entwined environmental repercussions of women's farming methods and their efforts to control their own reproduction. Chapter 2 features a topic familiar to any survey of American history: slavery. But it emphasizes the ways in which female slaves, using their environmental knowledge, subtly resisted their enslavement by limiting their masters' cotton production and accelerating soil exhaustion. The chapter dealing with the Great Depression and World War II de-emphasizes politics and economics to discuss how women employed conservation efforts in the wake of the Progressive Era to reassert some of their authority. *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers* will clearly not be the last word on the profound interrelationships between women's sex, sexuality, gender roles, race, power, and environment. It is intended instead to be a part of the larger conversation on the value of diversity and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding American history, particularly with regard to both gender and physical space.

Moreover, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers* reveals the range of women's experiences as well as their contributions to American environmental history, and to the nation's political, economic, and social history as well. Not all women desired to stay as disengaged from the natural world as Mary Jones. From Native American women's ingenious practices to retard soil depletion, to enslaved women's efforts to subtly resist enriching their masters, to nineteenth-century women's claims that women

were especially suited to the study of botany, to women's efforts to civilize the American West, the antebellum nation was profoundly shaped by women's engagement with their environments. Following the Civil War, women continued to wield significant influence as they served as midwives to the conservation movement, became empowered by the natural world through scouting and other organizations, contributed to the American victory in two world wars and combated the effects of the Great Depression by producing, preparing, and preserving their own food in order to avoid waste, and led efforts to save the planet while carrying out environmental justice. Combined, their stories reveal vibrant characters and shine a light on underappreciated aspects of the often inspiring and always complex history of American women.